

# 'The Times They Are A-Changin'

Shifting demographics, social disruptions move congregations to explore how to remain relevant and serve their communities



**Many pastors may hear today the echo of Bob Dylan's iconic lyrics** as they reflect on the rapid social and cultural changes that are affecting Christian congregations. Digital technologies are not only changing ways that people worship. They also are affecting daily ministry and efforts to keep members connected with one another. Moreover, significant demographic shifts throughout the United States are changing the neighborhoods in which many congregations are located and conduct their ministries. These and other changes are affecting churches and influencing how individuals and families—especially young adults—participate in congregational life.

In this fluid context, Lilly Endowment launched the Thriving Congregations Initiative to strengthen Christian congregations and help them thrive on into the future. According to the Rev. Tim Shapiro, president of the Indianapolis-based Center for Congregations, strong and thriving congregations have vitality and engage in ministries that are relevant to members and their communities. With this in mind, this initiative is designed to help churches explore and understand social and cultural changes and gain clarity about their missions and values. Through the initiative, the Endowment seeks to encourage congregations to draw on practices from their theological traditions to adapt and meet the new and emerging needs of their members and others in the communities they serve.

## Fostering Vitality in Various Contexts

Through two rounds of grantmaking—in 2019 and in 2020—the Endowment made grants totaling a little more than \$117 million to 115 organizations that are leading Thriving Congregations programs across the United States.

These organizations include seminaries, denominational agencies, other church-related organizations, and congregations with the capacity to support other churches, and they have launched programs that are working with congregations from diverse theological traditions that are engaged in ministries in a wide variety of contexts.

Grant-funded efforts include the University of Notre Dame's Church Communications Ecology Program. It is helping Catholic parishes nationwide—including St. John Catholic Church in Goshen, Ind.—understand how digital technologies are affecting parishioners and ministers as individuals and the impact of technology on worship, faith formation, pastoral care and the nature of Christian identity.

The General Synod of the Reformed Church of America's Renovations Project is helping churches around the country re-imagine their missional future as they explore what it means to share faith and serve one another; Payne Theological Seminary's Mapping the Future of Black Methodism program is strengthening congregational ministries in the Midwest; Latin American Bible Institute's Learning Communities and Hispanic Church Program is engaging Hispanic congregations in the western U.S.; Mere Christianity Forum's Tap Roots and Seed Crystals program, designed

to help congregations in college towns to reach young people; and Yale Divinity School's program is working with churches in the New Haven, Connecticut, region.

In early 2020 the first wave of programs was beginning to take shape. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, becoming a profound and unexpected social force affecting faith communities—and the Thriving Congregations programs designed to engage them.

## A Year Like No Other

The year 2020 was nothing like Pastor Davie Tucker Jr. ever imagined, although it dawned with promise for the 24 Tennessee churches that American Baptist College had gathered under the wings of a Thriving Congregations program.



● The Rev. Jose Arroyo of St. John Catholic Church in Goshen, Ind., (opposite) is participating in the University of Notre Dame's national program exploring technology and congregations. ● Pastor Davie Tucker Jr. directs the American Baptist College's Thriving Congregations program in Tennessee (below). ● The Rev. Tim Shapiro is president of the Center for Congregations (left).







Tucker is pastor of Beech Creek Missionary Baptist Church in Nashville and program director for the Thriving Congregations grant at American Baptist College, a historically Black college with deep regional connections. The Endowment grant is supporting the college's Empowering Congregations to Heal Communities program. Through the program, Black congregations of varying denominations and sizes from four urban areas—Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis and Nashville—are exploring how to engage theological convictions and practices of inclusive justice as they minister to people in their neighborhoods.

During the night of March 2, 2020, Tucker and his wife awoke to the terrifying sounds of a powerful tornado ripping through north Nashville. The storm barreled across a 100-mile swath of Tennessee, killing 128 people and damaging or destroying thousands of homes, businesses and churches.

As cleanup began, the COVID-19 pandemic forced churches, traditional places of refuge in times of grief and need, to close their doors and quickly adapt to social distancing and remote worship, even while members were sick and dying.

Spring and summer brought more suffering with the police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, a fresh wound from the familiar and painful scourge of racially-motivated violence.

"In my entire life, I never imagined that I would live through such a struggle, in which instability and uncertainty were the rule of the day," Tucker says. "We had to adapt to changing conditions on the ground."

The Thriving Congregations grant enabled American Baptist College to be flexible with how it supports churches and pastors as they learn new ways of ministering in communities facing rapid change and, yes, crisis. The year of hardship reinforced the importance of recapturing the powerful and prophetic Black church tradition, according to Tucker.

"In some ways, we have lost the theological imagination that once allowed us to lean into the life-threatening realities our people have had to face and ask, 'What is God saying to me?' It requires

imagination to take risks and challenge assumptions to address suffering and encourage flourishing," he says. "It is hard to give words to that connection, but we know when we have been in the presence of the Divine."

## Congregations as Communities of Faith and Practice

Congregations have long served as the local communities where Christians gather for worship, pass down faith to their children, extend care to one another and seek to strengthen their relationships with God.

**"In many neighborhoods, towns and cities, congregations are touchstones for the entire human lifecycle—birth, marriage, sickness, old age and death," says Shapiro of the Center for Congregations. "They are the places where people turn as they approach these life-changing crossroads in their lives."**

Congregations also are communities where people learn how to love others beyond their local churches and where they draw on their faith to strengthen the social fabric locally and around the world, according to Shapiro, who has researched and written about practices that foster the vitality of Christian congregations.

To remain relevant, congregations need to adapt to the rapid changes having an impact on society—from the demographic shifts affecting congregations in rural, urban and suburban settings to the ever-evolving impact of digital technology on everyone, notes Shapiro.

● Members of multiple congregations are involved in Cornerstone University's Thriving Congregations program focused on neighborhood outreach in Grand Rapids, Mich.



## "Big Ideas"

The Rev. Eliza Cortés Bast, pastor and program director of the Renovations Project, the Thriving Congregations program for the General Synod of the Reformed Church of America (RCA), says the initiative is encouraging her to "go after big ideas" with RCA congregations from around the country.

"Our old model of saying 'You, come to us,' was very frustrating to those who were limited by geography, for pastors who were bi-vocational, or those who had other circumstances that made travel difficult," Cortés Bast says. Yet she, like other leaders, needed to make unanticipated program adjustments in the face of the pandemic. "This year, we had the additional challenge of leaders who were exceptionally anxious and tired. We knew we had to adjust and change."

Developing an online digital platform, Learn.Faithward.org, was always part of the plan for the RCA program, but the pandemic accelerated the rollout of new digital resources, including a podcast network. "If there had been no pressure on us, we wouldn't have moved so quickly," Cortés Bast says.

"My hope is that the church will look for a new normal. The heart of this grant is looking at what are 'good bones' and what needs to be refreshed," she adds. "Thriving Congregations gives us the freedom to dream something different."

● The Rev. Eliza Cortés Bast leads the Thriving Congregations program of the Reformed Church of America (above). ● The Rev. Khary Bridgewater directs the Thriving Congregations program of Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Mich. (right).

## An Emphasis on Relevance

Before COVID-19, "church" was what happened on Sunday morning, according to the Rev. Khary Bridgewater, director of the Thriving Congregations program at Cornerstone University's Urban Church Leadership Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In 2020, Grand Rapids experienced "church" in action: finding food for hungry people and helping clergy understand the COVID-19 risks so they could work to keep their congregations safe. "Church" became working with local and state health authorities to dispel myths about vaccines and helping people get vaccinated. It became about ministering to people experiencing deep pain and high anxiety during a time of intense stress over racial and political divisions. "This grant enabled us to walk with churches at this unprecedented moment," Bridgewater says. "Without this grant, we would not be engaged in this way. We had a team and resources in place, and there is no doubt that without this grant, people would have died."

While the community continues to recover from grief, lingering illness and financial fallout, the Urban Church Leadership Center has begun to refocus on the grant's initial work: helping Black, Latino, Asian and new immigrant congregations connect their ministries to people in their communities. A cohort of clergy and lay leaders is engaged in a process to connect parishioners with the residents of surrounding communities. Congregations are using research tools to better understand changing culture in their communities. Cornerstone's Thriving Congregations program is making small capacity-building grants to help congregations design, test and implement new ministries.

"Our objective is for churches to think deeply about the ways they help their members form faith and communicate it with others," Bridgewater says. "We are thinking about what it means to gather and be engaged. Those are questions we need to ask more than ever if we are to be relevant in this new environment."







# Mission Critical Work for the Future of Theological Education

## 'Teaching in seminary is my destiny'

In her mid-20s, Gina A. S. Robinson was happy and successful, a young Emory University graduate working at an Atlanta law firm.

Life started "taking a turn," as she became deeply involved with youth ministry at Elizabeth Baptist Church in Atlanta, working with middle school girls, Robinson says.

"I began to realize the difference between loving something and feeling passionate. I loved my job at the law firm, but I was passionate about the work I was doing in my church," she says. "As I prayed for direction, I heard the Spirit telling me to go to seminary. I said, 'If You say I need to go, I'll go.'"

Robinson did go. She earned a Master of Divinity degree from Candler School of Theology at Emory, followed by a Master of Sacred Theology degree from Yale Divinity School. Then Robinson heard a call to teaching and entered the Ph.D. program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.



In 2020, she began work on her dissertation about efforts to elevate the voices and experiences of Black girls in theological discourse and to create spaces where Black girls and women can thrive and contribute to the flourishing of Christian communities. Putting research into practice, she has worked with youth at Atlanta's historic Ebenezer Baptist Church and with students at the Children's Defense Fund Freedom School in Evanston.

Her goal is to find a permanent faculty position. "I feel that teaching in seminary is my destiny," Robinson says.

During her graduate school journey, Robinson has had support from the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE). For nearly 70 years, FTE, which has awarded more than 6,000 fellowships, focused its efforts on inspiring young people to explore careers in ministry and in the academy to make a difference in the world through leadership in Christian communities.

Since 1999, Lilly Endowment has supported dissertation-year fellowships for students of African descent under FTE's Doctoral Fellowships Program for Students of Color, which also provides fellowships for doctoral students of Latino, Asian, Pacific Islands or First Nations descent.

In addition to providing \$25,000 fellowship awards, FTE leads dissertation writers' workshops, facilitates mentoring relationships with senior scholars, convenes professional development gatherings and helps build relationships among fellows. The program maintains a 97 percent completion rate among the doctoral fellows.

Robinson's FTE experience was during a summer program for students of color pursuing doctorates in religion, Bible and theology. Now, as an FTE Doctoral Fellow, she is grateful for how the program nurtures her as a scholar.

"The support I receive from FTE enables me to focus on my studies without the burden of worrying about financial means or seeking mentorship outside of Garrett," says Robinson. "Now that I am at the dissertation phase, the support and encouragement from FTE not only contributes to my professional development, but more importantly to my overall well-being."

## Addressing the Challenge

FTE is just one Endowment-funded effort that supports doctoral students from communities of color. Others are the Hispanic Theological Institute (HTI) at Princeton Theological Seminary and the Asian Theological Summer Institute (ATSI), which is based at United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia.

According to Frank Yamada, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, the percentage of faculty from communities of color in theological schools is low. "To adequately prepare their students to serve churches in increasingly diverse ministry contexts, it is mission critical for theological schools to recruit and develop more faculty from

● Gina A.S. Robinson is answering God's call to become a theologian (opposite). ● Association of Theological Schools President Frank Yamada says seminaries grow stronger when their faculties reflect the diversity within Christianity.





communities of color. It is especially imperative for their increasing numbers of students of color to have faculty who understand fully their particular traditions and can serve as mentors and role models,” says Yamada.

For example, the number of Latino Christian churches in the U.S. is growing rapidly. Yet fewer than five percent of faculty in American theological schools are Latino, which means that many seminaries do not have faculty who understand cultural contexts and are prepared to share their perspectives and expertise with the next generation of students.

The Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI) was established in 1996 to address this challenge. It is a consortium of 24 universities and theological schools collaborating to increase the number and quality of Latino faculty in theological disciplines teaching in theological schools nationwide.

In 2003, the Endowment made its first grant to Princeton to support HTI. Additional grants have been made since 2016 to fund HTI’s work with doctoral students.

With Endowment funding, HTI provides doctoral students with \$25,000 dissertation fellowships, a mentoring program, professional development conferences and other resources to help them progress through their Ph.D. programs.

Since 2002, HTI has achieved a 94 percent completion rate for doctoral participants, and 144 HTI alumni are now teaching in seminaries and universities across the nation. Their academic

leadership in places where pastors and lay leaders are being formed holds the potential to influence theological and religious conversations for future generations.

### An Affirming Space

Financial support for HTI scholars is critical because funding pools for theological graduate education have dried up dramatically,

according to the Rev. Joanne Rodríguez, HTI’s executive director. “Our students already come to this endeavor at a deficit, because there is very little wealth built up among first- and even second-generation Hispanic students,” Rodríguez says. “Too often, the choice is either that you increase your debt, or you don’t continue your studies.”

● The Rev. Joanne Rodríguez directs the Hispanic Theological Institute (above). ● The Forum for Theological Exploration gathers students enrolled in Ph.D. programs in theology for workshops and networking (right).

But the financial piece of HTI is not all that inspires loyalty among alumni. “HTI has stood out as exemplary for so many reasons,” says Daniel Ramírez, associate professor of American religions at Claremont Graduate University in California.

“The gatherings of scholars have been so affirming in terms of providing a friendly context in which to try out ideas and a rare forum for deep ecumenical dialogue, for everyone from Catholics to Pentecostals and everything in between,” he says.



Born and raised in California, Ramírez was a first-generation college student at Yale as well as the son—and grandson—of Pentecostal church members, part of a wave of evangelical Christianity conversion in the U.S. Southwest that dates back to the early part of the 20th century.

While working as a university administrator at Stanford in the early 1990s, Ramírez began exploring his family story and the history surrounding it. The result was a paper presented at an academic conference where he met Grant Wacker, a well-known expert in American religion, who invited Ramírez to pursue religious studies at Duke University.

Since earning his Ph.D. in 2005, Ramírez has carved out a career of teaching, researching, and writing about U.S. and Latin American religious history and culture at Claremont and in previous faculty postings at the University of Michigan and Arizona State University. He also is the first Latino elected president of the American Society of Church History.



HTI served a “catalytic function” at the beginning of his career and continues to play an important role, Ramírez says. He attends at least one HTI gathering each year, has served as an official HTI mentor three times, and currently serves on the HTI steering committee.

“Inspired by my own mentors, I try to pay it forward,” he says.

Ramírez and other HTI scholars bring much needed diversity to

academe, Rodríguez says. “Lilly Endowment provides us with resources to work with diverse Hispanic communities, which allows us to bring different perspectives and ways of nurturing to all of God’s people,” she says. “HTI is life-transformative work that is done en conjunto [altogether] for the edification of all God’s creation.”



## Stronger, Diverse Leadership

In his work as president of FTE, Stephen Lewis brings many lessons he learned as a young banking officer before experiencing a call to ministry in 1997 and leaving the corporate world for seminary.

As part of a leadership cohort at the bank, Lewis benefited from mentoring and other experiences and he believed they could help the church and its young leaders, too.

“The way the bank invested in us was not out of a sense of crisis, its leaders recognized that the strength and future of the institution depends on the next generation. I thought that I could bottle up all that I had experienced and learned about cultivating leadership and take it to the church,” Lewis says.

FTE helps create stronger, more diverse leadership in theological education. And, whether inside the academy or out in the world, Lewis believes that addressing society’s challenges depends on a capacity to harness a collective genius. “Diversity is our superpower,” he says.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke of the ‘living water’ of the Spirit. “That living water is right before our eyes, in our young men and women,” Lewis says. “At FTE, we say, ‘yes’ to that next generation. The church is worthy of your gifts, your voice and your leadership.”

- Daniel Ramírez, a religion professor at Claremont Graduate University, is an alumnus of the Hispanic Theological Institute (above).
- Stephen Lewis is president of the Forum for Theological Exploration.